Surprise!
Jeremiah 31:31-34
Luke 1:26-28

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The birth of Jesus Christ was a surprise. It caught everybody unprepared: Bethlehem, the inn-keeper, Herod, the shepherds: even Mary, the mother, whose first response to her condition was perplexity, that is to say - complete surprise. Were her story written today, in the vernacular, her response to the rather unusual announcement of the angel Gabriel well might be, "Who, me?"

The birth of Jesus Christ was a surprise, and if that birth is still worth celebrating it is because it is still a surprise. If the birth is worthy of a whole month of preparation, called Advent, it is because it means that the God who pulled the first surprise, is still very much in the business of surprises.

And yet, we chose to celebrate the birth in a manner that is more traditional, more predictable, than anything else that is celebrated throughout the year. We, and I count myself among this number, observe the birth of Christ by way of customs that our parents taught to us, and their parents taught them. The Advent wreath has a thousand year history, Christmas trees have been around for centuries, as have turkeys, carols and gifts. It is a time for nostalgia, and rituals that have deep and personal meaning to our families, rituals that are repeated religiously every year, and without which our celebration would feel incomplete. My feelings run deeply at this point - as yours do - I am sure. I'm open to the new and the different in most areas of life, but I don't want anybody tampering with the way I chcose to celebrate Christmas.

I saw an advertisement last week that seemed to summarize the style of our Christmas observance. It had to do with recapturing the past in a Southern plantation, complete with yule log, tree with dandles, 1870 costumes and all the rest.

Now, I have no argument with the nostalgia and customs of a traditional Christmas, and if I did I'd have a stiffer argument from my family. But I do have a concern that the significance of what we're celebrating doesn't get lost

that the significance of the birth does not become traditional and predictable. God is not very predictable. He did a wildly improbable thing twenty centuries ago. And we celebrate that holy surprise in the faith - the expectation, really, that God continues to come into our midst in surprising, unpredictable and improbable ways.

There is Biblical precedent for that kind of statement: Jeremiah: 31, for instance. Let's think for a moment about Jeremiah and his world and what he said about God to his people.

Jeremiah's world was coming apart at the seams: all the old certainties were gone: and changes were happening so rapidly that we who live in the changing social climate of the twentieth century can understand Jeremiah's time perhaps better than anyone since. Jerusalem had been leveled and sacked: the best of Jeremiah's people had been carried off to Babylon to live as exiles, and Jeremiah himself was soon to follow. The promised land, the Holy people of the Covenant, Jerusalem, the Temple itself, all symbols of God's faithfulness and his promise to his people were in the hands of the enemy-pagan hands to make matters worse. If ever there was a time to celebrate the certainties of the past, to resurrect old realities, to seek the comfort of an "Old Time Religion" it was the time of Jeremiah. He was an old man, not given to radical change; not susceptible to every new wind of doctrine and practice. Jeremiah was no revolutionary, in our definition of the term. But there he stood, with everything that was holy and certain and traditional lying in ruins about his feet, daring to suggest that God was about to pull off a surprise. Out of the rubble a new reality would emerge. Out of the ruin God would act in a new way. Listen to his words: "Behold the days are coming . . . when I will make a new covenant with Israel. . . not like the covenant which I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of Egypt."

Jeremiah's vision of God was one of unpredictability: God could and would do a new thing: God would surprise his people by acting redemptively to establish a new relationship. History bore him out. The Babylonians were

defeated by the Persians, and Israel returned across the highway in the desert; back to the promised land: back to a new covenant with God. Jeremiah was bold enough to proclaim a God who was surprising.

Think, now, about Mary. Centuries later she saw the same vision as Jeremiah: a God who was about to surprise his people. The message of the angel was so imporbable that it troubled and perplexed her. God had chosen her, young, engaged Judean maid, to bear in her womb the savior of mankind. It's no wonder Mary was afraid: no wonder the angel promptly said, "don't be afraid, Mary"; a line that comes up again when a band of rag tag shepherds hear of the birth.

Or think about Mary's son, Jesus of Nazareth. The people around him were in for the surprise of their lives. Accustomed to a pre-packaged, neat religion rules, regulations, rituals and customs; accustomed to dealing with life out of the saftey of religious tradition, they had to deal with a young man - in years and of heart - who startled them with simple little stories about lilies in the field and birds in the air, and a widow and her mite. Accustomed to routine they had to deal with the surprising brashness of a thirty three year old who turned tables over in their temple court, and called their wisest, most pious experts - hypocrites. Accustomed to a way of life based on neat definitions of right and wrong they had to deal with the surprising possibilities of a love that embraced some very unlovely people, and that forgave even the perpetrators of thorns and nails and spears. That was a surprise! And the fact that they found it necessary to kill him, is perhaps an indicator of how deeply we distrust the idea of a surprising, unpredictable God, and how much we need an old-man God who never does anything differently, if he does anything at all.

There's nothing wrong with Christmas traditions, unless they somehow stamp out the real message of Christmas - namely that to believe and to live in communion with the God and Father of Jesus Christ is to live a life of surprises: a life open to all kinds of new, unpredictable events.

Somehow, we've managed to be Christians without that. Somehow, we've

managed to exercise all the freshness and promise and newness and hope from Christianity until it becomes the very prototype of the traditional - the status quo - the never changing, always the same realities of our own past.

In a changing and frightening world we're in the market for something that is unchanging and non-frightening. In a social environment that watches the parade to oblivion of all the realities of the past, we're looking for something with staying power. And all too often our anxiety drives us to a quest of something called "Old Time Religion". What we usually mean by that is a religiosity that surrounds itself with nostalgia and sentimentality, with forms and rituals that are familiar and therefore comfortable. Life, after all, is distrubing and threatening enough six days a week; and on the seventh day we ought to be able to take hold of something that will not ever change. Unfortunately our quest leads us to the forms - and not the unchanging reality which is the love of God. Unfortunately, our anxiety all too often, drives us into the arms of an "old - time - religiosity" - that has very little to do with the exciting surprises of a God who came among us in Jesus Christ.

Compare, for instance, old man Jeremiah, seriously advocating that God was about to radically alter the whole doctrinal foundation of his people (and that's exactly what he was saying): compare that with people leaving the church because guitars are used instead of an organ on occasion. Compare old man Jeremiah's young vision of an unpredictable God with the internal squabbles in the church today updating the rituals that have collected over the years.

Compare the freshness of the young man Jesus of Nazareth with what happens to him in the context of "Old Time Religion".. Edmund Steimle said it well: (The Protestant Hour, Lutheran Series, Nov. 29, 1970) "We don't crucify him today, of course; we are far too well-mannered for that. We simply take his face - youthful, angry, aching with love for the 'lost' of the world, on fire with a passion for his father . . . we simply take that face and mold it with our bare hands into the predictably safe and insipid head of a Christ by Sallman and hang him on the wall. We dillute his passion into the sweetness of

nineteenth century hymns: 'O Jesus thou art pleading in accents meek and low . (can you imagine Jesus Christ pleading in an accent meek and low?) We take the unpredictable results of his unbelievable demands for love and smooth it all out into a safe and predictable request that we do the best we can under the circumstances. No. We don't crucify; we simply carve the guts out of this unpredictable Lord of ours."

That's strong medicine - but compare, if you dare to, the predictable savior of the church with the man who strides across the pages of the New Testament.

Somehow, we've made Christianity into a flat, predictable routine, and God into a harmless old man; while the Old Testament portrays a surprising God who does some unlikely things: and the New Testament, in recording the clearest picture of God men have ever seen, brings us face to face with an unpredictable and surprising young man.

The message of Advent, and the meaning of Christmas is that life is full of surprises, because life - human history - your life and mine - is exactly where God carries on his work of healing and loving and reconciling. We celebrate his once coming - and his always coming.

Sam Keen, one of the young radical theologians of our day has written what he calls a "demythologized version of the earliest Christian Gospel." Let me share it with you. "Look! Attend! Listen! A child is born . . a new possibility has emerged. Novelty has entered history, and therefore you may be free of the binding illusion that your fate is written in the stars, that you are victims of an order that is determined with no regard for your freedom or care for your being . . . The ground out of which history springs is alive and gracious; therefore anything is possible. Live in openness, wonder and gratitude, accepting the mysterious gift of the ability to create, act and forgive!" (Apology for Wonder, p. 39)

And Robert Hudnut, in the preface to his book "Surprised by God," puts it

this way: "I did not become a minister because I had found God. I became a minister in order to find him. And, on various occasions over the last few years, I have been surprised, by what I have found - or if you want to be 'orthodox', by what has found me. Grace is serendipity." (Surprised by God, p.9)

That's the message of the Advent and surprising birth. Life is full of God's grace. And no matter what is happening to us - no matter what suffering we are enduring, no matter what personal pain we are experiencing, no matter that our world may be lying in ruins about our feet, our God is one who comes to pick up the pieces and bind up our wounds, and open doors to new possibilities we have never imagined. And when he does - we shall be as surprised as Jeremiah, and Mary and the shepherds.

So we observe Advent. And it will be traditional and predictable. We'll do the same things we've done before: sing the same carols, light the same candles, read the same stories. And it can end there - an exercise in nostalgia. Or, this time through we can listen carefully for the newness of it all. We can be open to the stories of God's surprising coming in the assurance that he is not nearly as predictable as we think he is. We can be open to new possibilities in our own lives, because he keeps coming into our lives.

We can listen to the familiar tale of a birth that was a surprise - where it happened: and is always surprise when it is understood.

Amen.

Father, as we repeat the familiar customs this year, help us to be startled by the goodness and love and hope you have given: through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.